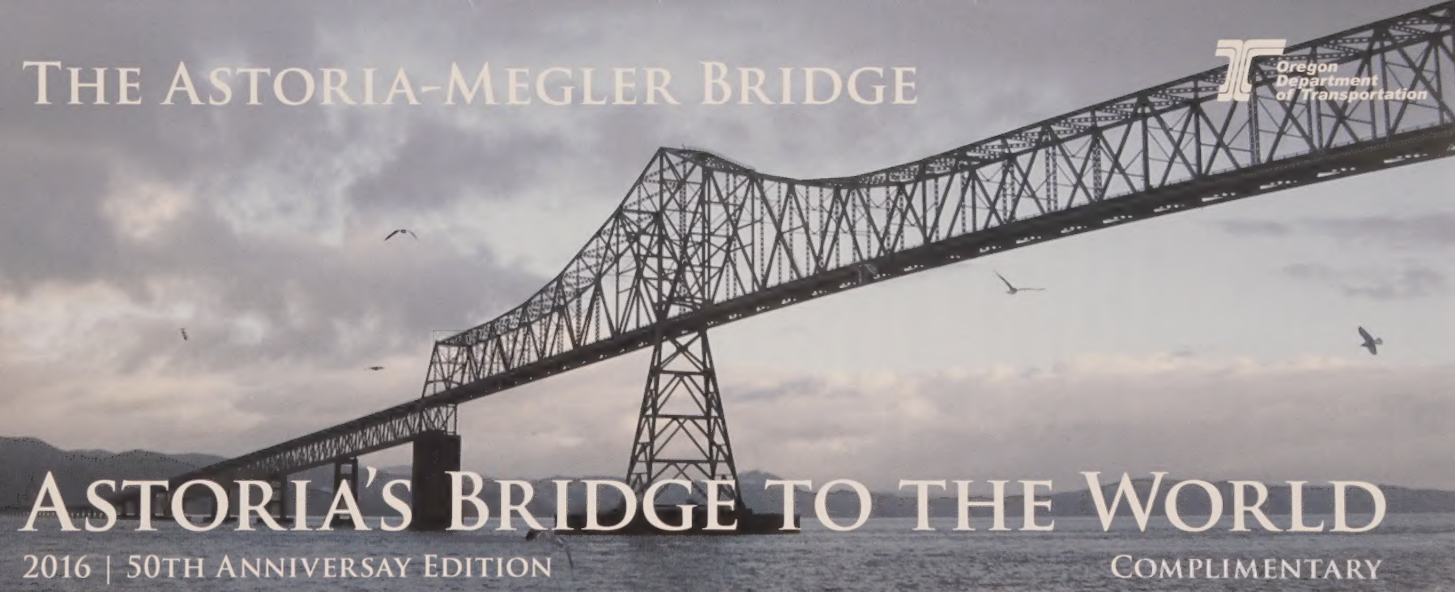
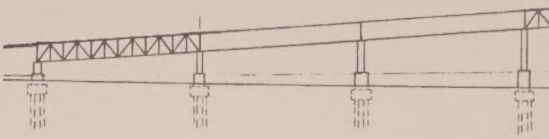

The Astoria-Megler Bridge
Oregon Department of Transportation
Astoria's Bridge to the World
2016 | 50th Anniversay Edition
Complimentary

The Astoria-Megler Br



Spanning the mighty Columbia River, the Astoria-Megler Bridge links the Oregon and Washington sections of U.S. 101, the Pacific Coast Highway. The bridge stretches 4.1 miles from Astoria, Ore., to Point Ellice, Wash., and contains the longest continuous three-span through-truss in the world.

When opened on Aug. 27, 1966, the bridge completed U.S. 101 as an unbroken link between the Canadian and Mexican borders.

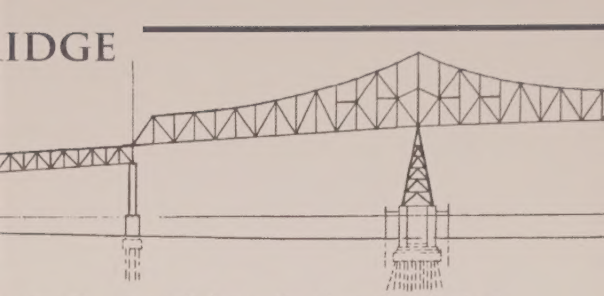
The story of the Astoria-Megler bridge is a story of technology. But, just as important, it's also a story of people, particularly the people of Astoria. Without their determination, there would be no bridge.

Canoes, ferries, automobiles

Astoria's first settlers quickly found out what the Native Americans who lived in the area had known for centuries: travel across the mouth of the Columbia River can be dangerous in the best of times and impossible in the worst.

The first ferry service between Oregon and Washington began in 1840, when Solomon

Tourist No. 3



Smith, Astoria's first school teacher, lashed two canoes together and began carrying passengers and cargo across the river. Ferries of one kind or another served the area intermittently through the turn of the century.

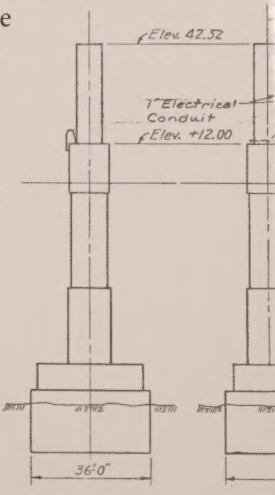
Then, in 1915, construction crews completed the Columbia River Highway (today U.S. 30), opening a direct overland link between Astoria and Portland.

Capt. Elfving and the Tourist I

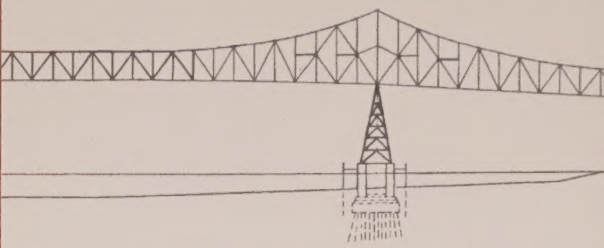
As the number of motor cars traveling through Astoria increased, so did the demand for dependable ferry service. Capt. Frtiz Elfving established the first commercial ferry service in 1921 when the *Tourist I* made her maiden voyage.

The state of Oregon purchased Capt. Elfving's company in 1946 and assigned operational control the State Highway Department, now the Oregon Department of Transportation.

Ferry service had serious drawbacks. It was slow (the 4.5-mile trip took half an hour in good weather.) And since the boats could take only a limited number of vehicles each trip, passengers had long waits when there was a lot of traffic.



Pier 8

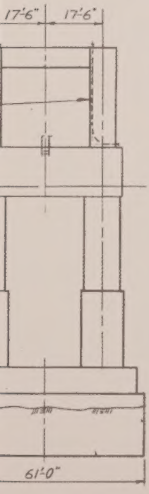


To complicate matters, the ferries didn't run in bad weather, a frequent occurrence during the winter at the mouth of the Columbia River.

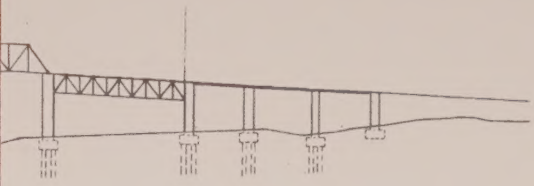
Finally, the ferry service was expensive. The Highway Department lost over $2 million running the ferry service between 1947 and 1965.

Astoria's push for the bridge

Civic leaders and transportation officials in Oregon and Washington had for many years discussed building a bridge across the mouth of the Columbia to link the two states. Local officials tried three times – in 1932, 1941, and 1944 – to find the money to build a trans-Columbia bridge, but preliminary engineering reports said it would be too difficult. During World War II, federal officials were afraid the bridge project would block the river entrance at a time when the Columbia played a vital role in the war effort.



Then, in 1953, the Port of Astoria launched a new effort. The Port formed a partnership with the Oregon Highway Department, the Washington Toll Bridge Authority, and Pacific County, Washington, to study how to build the bridge. In 1957, the Oregon and Washington legislatures appropriated $100,000 to prepare the plans, and in 1961 the two legislatures agreed to joint funding of the project.



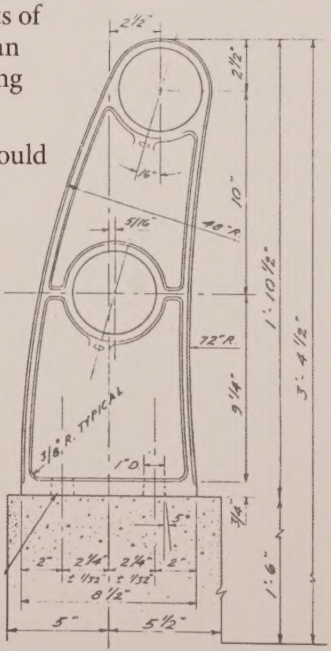
Finally, on Sept. 15, 1961, the Oregon and Washington state highway commissions signed an agreement to construct the bridge.

1962 — Construction begins

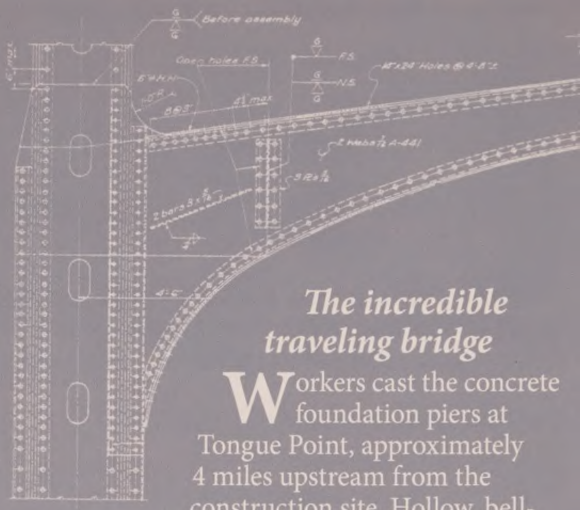
On Aug. 9, 1962, Oregon Gov. Mark Hatfield turned the first shovel of dirt, marking the official start of the project. (You can see the shovel used in the ceremony at the Clatsop County Historical Society museum on Exchange Street.) Construction began Nov. 5, 1962.

Bridge designers faced unique problems. They knew the bridge would have to withstand some of nature's worst attacks. Fierce Pacific storms, packing gusts of winds at 150 mph, can batter the coast during the winter months.

The concrete piers would have to withstand a river flood speed of 9 mph — powerful enough to sweep whole clumps of trees down the river during floods.



Cast aluminum post

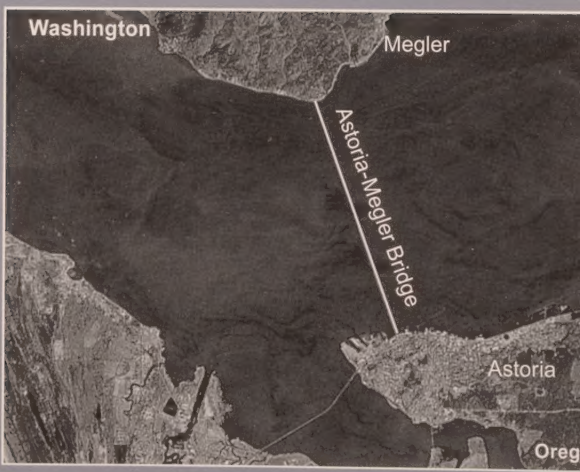


The incredible traveling bridge

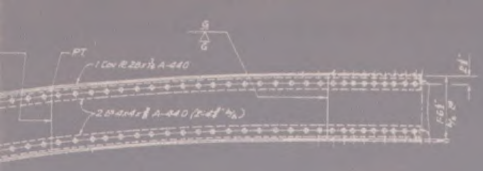
Workers cast the concrete foundation piers at Tongue Point, approximately 4 miles upstream from the construction site. Hollow, bell-shaped shells were first cast in concrete, then floated into place, sunk carefully to the river bottom, and filled with concrete.

Construction crews built whole sections of the steel superstructure on barges 90 miles upstream in Vancouver, Wash. Tugboats brought the barges to the site and an assembly crew carefully lifted the pieces into place with giant hydraulic jacks.

Finally, 1,356 days after construction began, the bridge was ready for its dedication.



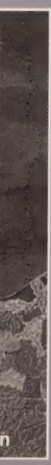
Aerial view of Astoria-Megler Bridge



Dedication draws thousands

(From left) Washington Gov. Dan Evans, Miss Washington Sandra Lee Marth, Oregon Gov. Mark Hatfield, and Miss Oregon Estrellita Schid join to cut the ribbon to open the bridge Aug. 27, 1966.

The morning of Aug. 27, 1966, dawned bright and clear in Astoria, much to the relief of the organizers of the dedication ceremony. Steady rain and blustery winds had pummeled the city for two days. Organizers were afraid they would have to move the ceremony indoors. But the weather cleared and at 2 p.m. Gov. Mark Hatfield of Oregon and Gov. Dan Evans of Washington cut a ribbon to open the toll gate, and the bridge officially opened to traffic.



More than 30,000 people watched the dedication. The Spokane, Portland and Seattle Railroad ran a special passenger train from Portland to the foot of the bridge for the event. A long queue of cars lined up on the approaches to the bridge for a free trip to the Washington side.

And the *R.W. Chesman*, the last of the Astoria ferryboats, provided free rides on its last day of service.

The toll comes tumbling down

The original agreement between Oregon and Washington called for a toll to pay for the Astoria-Megler bridge over a 30-year period. Critics predicted "the bridge to nowhere" would never pay for itself. They said it would "drain the pocketbooks of Oregon and Washington taxpayers for decades to come."

The first year, 206,216 vehicles crossed the bridge. By 1993, more than 1.6 million vehicles a year were crossing the "bridge to nowhere."

And on Dec. 24, 1993 — more than two years early — the bonds were paid off and the toll removed.

Since 1993, over $50 million has been spent to keep the bridge maintained, including painting, replacing 16,000 rivets, upgrading walkways and ladders, and adding LED lighting.

Additional improvments include a weather station, TripCheck cameras and solar navigational lights. The bridge is also used by utility companies to span the Columbia River with communications and fiber optic cables.

Astoria's "bridge to the world"

Today, about 7,500 cars a day cross the Astoria-Megler bridge and U.S. 101 is unbroken between the Canadian and Mexican borders. Astoria's "bridge to nowhere" has become the city's "bridge to the world."

The Oregon Department of Transportation gratefully acknowledges the invaluable help of the Clatsop County Historical Society in producing this brochure.

Photo credits: Clatsop County Historical Society – Tourist No. 3 (negative 2804-344), ribbon cutting (negative 2274-282). ODOT ODOT History Center – Cover photo (negative M01-165A, frame 35), aerial view, line drawings from ODOT Bridge Section archives.

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